How Can I Elevate Student Achievement beyond Just Test Scores?

We believe that our nation’s schools are too narrowly focused on a single dimension of achievement, which can result in disengaged students and teachers and, often, poor student outcomes. The reality is that educators, parents, and students themselves care about much more than just the traditional view of what mastering knowledge and skills looks like on a test. We want students to also learn to be deep thinkers and good people who care about the quality of their work.

Promoting a Multi-Dimensional View of Student Achievement

We promote a three-dimensional view of student achievement—mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality student work—that offers a vision for education we would want for every child and provides the “north star” for all of our work (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: EL Education’s Dimensions of Student Achievement

<table>
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<th>Dimensions of Student Achievement</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers and Leaders</th>
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| Mastery of Knowledge and Skills | • Demonstrate proficiency and deeper understanding of how mastery in a body of knowledge and skills within each discipline  
• Apply the learning: transfer knowledge and skills to novel, meaningful tasks  
• Think critically: analyze, evaluate, and synthesize complex ideas and consider multiple perspectives  
• Communicate clearly: write, speak, and present ideas effectively in a variety of media within and across disciplines | • Ensure that curriculum, instruction, and assessments are rigorous, meaningful, and aligned with standards  
• Use assessment practices that position students as leaders of their own learning  
• Use meaningful data for both teachers and students to track progress toward learning goals  
• Engage all students in daily lessons that require critical thinking about complex, worthy ideas, texts, and problems |
| Character | • Work to become effective learners: develop the mindset and skills for success in college, career, and life (e.g., initiative, responsibility, perseverance, collaboration)  
• Work to become ethical people: treat others well and stand up for what is right (e.g., empathy, integrity, respect, compassion)  
• Contribute to a better world: put their learning to use to improve communities (e.g., citizenship, service) | • Elevate student voice and leadership in classrooms and across the school  
• Make habits of scholarship visible across the school and in daily instruction  
• Model a school-wide culture of respect and compassion  
• Prioritize social and emotional learning, alongside academic learning, across the school |
| High-Quality Student Work | • Create complex work: demonstrate higher-order thinking, multiple perspectives and transfer of understanding  
• Demonstrate craftsmanship: create work that is accurate and beautiful in conception and execution  
• Create authentic work: demonstrate original thinking and voice, connect to real-world issues and formats, and when possible, create work that is meaningful in the community beyond the school | • Design tasks that ask students to apply, analyze, evaluate and create as part of their work  
• Use models of excellence, critique, and multiple drafts to support all students to produce work of exceptional quality  
• Connect students to the world beyond school through meaningful fieldwork, expert collaborator, research, and service learning |

Mastery of Knowledge and Skills

Mastery of knowledge and skills is the dimension of student achievement that most schools are already fairly familiar and comfortable with. Held within this dimension are state tests and other high-stakes assessments that are a required part of public schooling. High-stakes achievement tests have an important role to play in shining a light on inequities in public schooling. However, our nation’s hyper-focus on these kinds of assessments in recent years has led to a reductionist vision of what mastery of knowledge and skills means and how students should be taught.

When interpreted and applied as intended, the new standards are also asking teachers to focus on critical thinking, effective communication, and deeper learning. Our curriculum compels students
to demonstrate deep understanding of concepts and content, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize their content knowledge, and demonstrate that they can transfer their understanding to novel tasks. When building knowledge of the world, students must consider multiple perspectives and viewpoints. They must present their thinking in multiple ways—in informal and formal writing, conversation, and formal presentations—which builds strong communication skills. Our curriculum gives students opportunities to develop these skills, and the assessments and performance tasks are designed to evaluate them in authentic ways.

Character

A central goal of our curriculum is to give students the tools to become effective, ethical learners who work to make the world a better place. We have our own language and approach to fostering what we call “habits of character,” which are a part of daily lessons at all grade levels. Our habits of character can and should complement, not replace, any existing frameworks, language, or routines for promoting social-emotional learning in your school. If another framework for character is in place at your school (e.g., Responsive Classroom; Caring School Communities; CASEL’s five core competencies), it will be important for you to help your students make connections between that framework and ours. In practice, this means helping students understand the meaning of specific words (e.g., if “tenacity” is used at your school, help students see the connection to “perseverance,” which is used in our curriculum). This unpacking is a great opportunity to teach academic vocabulary and for students to see how words that define character are connected to, not separate from, academic tasks.

Promoting character development is not new in schools. What makes our curriculum distinct is that it integrates an intentional focus on developing students’ habits of character within the context of academic lessons (e.g., persevering as they work on multiple drafts of their performance task). Character is not “preached” through admonishments; rather, it is learned through authentic experiences and ongoing reflection on those experiences. How children learn and the environment in which they learn is as important as what they learn.

High-Quality Student Work

When students complete their formal schooling, with few exceptions they will no longer be assessed by tests. Instead, they will be assessed by the quality of their character and their work. Preparing students to be successful in these areas is one of the reasons we are so focused on a broader definition of student achievement.

High-quality student work—work that demonstrates complexity, craftsmanship, and authenticity—not only has the power to assess aspects of student learning that can be elusive, such as communication skills and conceptual understanding, but can also motivate students. Models of high-quality work give students something to aspire to and can answer some of their most timeless questions: Why do we have to do this? How will we use this? High-quality work, especially when modeled after real-world work and embedding the knowledge and skills students are currently learning, can engage students in ways that little else can.

In the curriculum, a commitment to quality shows up in all kinds of ways—from scaffolded, and often collaborative, high-quality performance tasks to the everyday craftsmanship of practicing just the right shape of the mouth when pronouncing the difference between an “a” and a “u.” Helping students commit themselves to quality work and being leaders of their own learning is a thread throughout all components of the curriculum. (In Chapter 7A, we will explore how you can look at student work as one source of evidence to assess student progress.)

Of note, one key aspect of high-quality work—authenticity—was not always possible to build into our curriculum. Among other things, true authenticity can mean that student work is connected to a real community need. Within a nationwide curriculum like ours, it’s a challenge to make local connections that will have relevance across the country. This is one area ripe for enrichment, where your experience and creativity as a teacher can bring greater authenticity to students'
work. For example, consider using your social studies time to reinforce your fifth-graders’ literacy work on human rights by digging into a human rights crisis in your community. Allow students to see how what they study in school relates to (and can make a difference in) their own community.

**How Will Content-Based Literacy Benefit My Students?**

The design of our curriculum reflects compelling research showing that students learn best to become effective readers, writers, thinkers, and speakers when literacy instruction is content-based. Content-based literacy is an approach to helping students build literacy as they learn about the world.

Content knowledge and literacy skills are inextricably linked. The Common Core State Standards for ELA/literacy state: “Building knowledge systematically in English Language Arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade that, over time, will form one big picture. At a curricular or instructional level, texts—within and across grade levels—need to be selected around topics or themes that systematically develop the knowledge base of students” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 33).

Research shows that the deeper the content knowledge a student has, the more she is able to understand what she reads, and the more she is able to speak and write clearly about that content. In fact, remarkably, research shows that she is even more able to successfully read about and understand new content. This proficiency and knowledge transfer to the next occasion for reading and learning, creating an upward surge that builds on itself and is both highly rewarding and motivating (Baldwin, Peleg-Bruckner, and McClintock (1985); Cervetti, Jaynes, and Heibert (2009); Kintsch and Hampton (2009); McNamara and O’Reilly (2009)).

Content-based literacy is similar to, yet distinct from, what many educators refer to as “reading to learn.” The approaches are similar in that the goal is for students to learn about the world and build literacy skills; however, there are important differences. Reading to learn means that students first build strong literacy skills so that they can access texts, which allows them to build their knowledge of the world. By contrast, content-based literacy means students build their knowledge of the world by reading multiple texts on a topic—some with structured support and some independently—which allows them to read even more sophisticated texts and build more knowledge, which builds their literacy skills.
Turning on Students’ Curiosity Motors

Content-based literacy is highly engaging for students and, often, inspiring for teachers. You are probably familiar with children, either in your classroom or your own family, who become “obsessed” with dinosaurs, trucks, horses, or princesses. Their interests push them into texts that may be much more complex than they would choose if their own curiosity weren’t driving them like a motor. When students get into this zone, they can really dig in, even when the going gets tough. They read and read and can talk about their topics for hours.

Too often school isn’t the place where these interests are nurtured. Texts are disconnected or treated shallowly, and topics may shift from week to week. In our curriculum, we walk students into the content with the intention of turning on those curiosity motors. We build curiosity through high-interest topics, texts, and collaborative tasks, and we find that once students are hooked, they engage much more deeply in both the content and the key literacy standards of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For example, what follows is a sampling of some of the high-interest topics in the curriculum, which students are immersed in for eight to nine weeks:

» Toys and Play
» Birds
» Plants and Pollinators
» Adaptations and the Wide World of Frogs
» The American Revolution
» Stories of Human Rights

At the same time, students need skill-building to become fluent readers who can comprehend increasingly complex texts and communicate what they learn in writing. In the K–2 Reading Foundations Skills Block (Skills Block), students learn to crack the alphabetic code through a structured phonics program. This phonics work complements the strong focus on content-based literacy in the Module Lessons and K–2 Labs (Labs). The structured phonics program is not connected to the content-based modules, but neither is it “all work and no fun.” We have built in “engagement texts” that will appeal to young children and motivate them to read harder and harder texts. In Grades 3–5, students build skills in the Additional Language and Literacy (ALL) Block. The ALL Block is connected to the content-based modules and provides additional practice with complex texts, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. (Each of these components of the curriculum will be explored in depth in Chapter 2.)

Our curriculum aims to prove that a both/and approach to content and skills is possible and preferable. Research and experience have shown us that students need both content and skills and, beyond that, both should be woven together in ways that turn on those curiosity motors that keep driving students forward. Students learn best when they are engaged, and it’s hard to be engaged when learning skills in a vacuum. Building knowledge of the world is an important arrow in our quiver as we strive to accelerate literacy learning and excellence for all students.

How Do I Help Students Stay Active, Engaged, and Excited to Learn?

One of the fears for many teachers and parents in our test-centered educational world is that play and joy and creative pursuits in learning have been lost. In their place: tests, worksheets, and rows of disengaged students. These are well-founded fears and an unfortunate reality in far too many schools.

Our curriculum was designed with the needs of elementary learners in mind. We have balanced the need for students to be challenged academically and to advance on pace with grade-level peers with engaging instructional strategies and—yes—play, joy, and creative pursuits. Within the two or three hours per day of ELA instruction offered in our curriculum, your students will learn to read challenging texts and produce high-quality writing while at the same time building...